

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How Not to Be a Realist: The Case of Contest-Fetishism

Colin Bird

Department of Politics, University of Virginia  
Email: [cpb6f@virginia.edu](mailto:cpb6f@virginia.edu)

## Abstract

*One reason why the recently influential “realist” turn in political theory rejects mainstream theoretical approaches is that it views their moralistic orientation as a source of ideological credulity. Like Karl Marx before them, realists complain that “moralizing” social criticism is bound to be imprisoned in the illusions of the epoch. This essay suggests that contemporary political realism may itself invite comparable accusations of ideological complicity insofar as it equates politics and agonistic contestation, as many realists in fact do. The assumption that political interaction is essentially contestatory strikes many as plain common sense, undeniable in the face of any sober and realistic observation of actual politics. This essay suggests, to the contrary, that the seeming self-evidence of this assumption may precisely be a symptom of ideological illusion. To develop this suggestion, this essay contends that contemporary realism is vulnerable to charges of “contest-fetishism” that parallel Marx’s argument that the classical political economists he criticizes in *Capital* were blind to the “commodity-fetishism” of modern capitalism.*

**Keywords:** realism; ideology; agonism; commodity-fetishism; Karl Marx

## Introduction

In the pejorative Marxian sense assumed throughout this essay, ideology protects pervasive but suspect social practices from critical scrutiny, inducing agents to acquiesce prematurely in arrangements that oppress them or otherwise work against their interests. So understood, ideologies perform a reconciliatory function. They misrepresent the real circumstances of human association, typically by affirming the existing order as entirely appropriate, morally desirable, noble, just, or good, when more honest inspection would expose deep inadequacy. According to the standard Marxian analysis, all social formations face a constant threat of revolutionary dissolution from those forced to sacrifice for their survival, at least until communism arrives. Maintaining the existing order therefore requires that these sources of resistance be somehow neutralized. By administering highly moralized and idealized intellectual opiates to justify the status quo, ideologies reconcile agents to it while disguising the

legitimate grounds for resistance that simmer beneath the surface. Like pre-operative anesthetics, they render pliant and docile agents who would otherwise never willingly serve as “playthings of alien powers.” Hence—crudely to characterize Karl Marx—the brutal class conflicts and exploitation of capitalism get concealed beneath a consoling ideological refraction of market society as an “Eden” of equal human rights and liberties,<sup>1</sup> rational cooperation, individual independence and self-authorship, and the miraculous—to some eyes providential—reconciliation of opposing interests under free competition.

The recent resurgence of self-consciously “realist” political theory owes much to this Marxian stance.<sup>2</sup> Its most important pioneers—Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams<sup>3</sup>—invariably define realism in opposition to the “ethics-first” or “applied ethics” approaches they associate with Rawlsian liberals, Jurgen Habermas-inspired “discourse ethics,” Nozickian rights theories, utilitarianism, perfectionism, and luck egalitarianism—virtually all the paradigms that have dominated Western political philosophy since the 1960s. Contemporary realists, to be sure, depart from Marx in many ways, notably in insisting on the autonomy of the “political” realm rather than reducing it to economics. Yet, like Marx, contemporary realists accuse their mainstream opponents of commencing political reflection too far outside history and its real struggles, in an ideological space populated by moralized concepts of well-being, justice, fairness, and other values. The corrective that realists recommend affirms the priority of the actual political conditions that attend the posing of matters of public concern. For realists, politics as it is, not moralizing ideologies about what might be, should come first.

This essay makes no effort to referee this already rather tired debate between “realists” and their opponents. It is also agnostic on the question of whether Rawlsians, Nozickians, discourse-ethicists, and exponents of other mainstream theoretical traditions should be seen as ideological apologists of some sort. Nor does it question the validity of the realist turn. It instead asks whether aspects of realism might not themselves invite charges of ideological complicity. I want to consider whether realists have been so intent on exposing ideological credulity in their moralist opponents that they have missed the presence of comparable ideological errors in their own outlook. That suggestion need not invalidate the realists’ criticisms of their traditionalist interlocutors; but even if they are correct that the latter succumb to ideological illusion of one kind, it does not follow that realists are themselves immune from other forms of ideological thinking. This essay offers some reasons for finding that suspicion plausible, at least with regard to one common theme in much recent realist discourse: its emphasis on contestation.

Suppose we ask: “What does it mean to put ‘politics’ first, as realists urge?” The answer will obviously depend on how one conceives the “political,” and it is here

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 280.

<sup>2</sup> Hence the emphasis on ideology critique in much recent realist writing. See, for example, Ugur Aytac and Enzo Rossi, “Ideology Critique without Morality: A Radical Realist Approach,” *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 4 (2022): 1–13.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Bernard Williams, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,” in Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–18.

that realists have often appealed to the claim I want to inspect. I have in mind the view that politics has an inherently “contestatory” or “agonist” dimension that traditional modes of political theory fail to acknowledge or seek to suppress. Here are some representative statements from a self-described realist, Matt Sleat:

Politics is the sphere of contest between human wills competing for the power or influence to determine what decision is taken.<sup>4</sup>

Politics is ... the clash between persons who struggle for power to realise rival reasonably held conceptions of the political ideal. [Such conceptions are] ... [c]ontestant[s] amongst a plurality of reasonable others.<sup>5</sup>

[Realists affirm the] political as a space of contestation between different and competing conceptions of the political good.<sup>6</sup>

[P]olitics takes place in conditions of radical disagreement in which all moral and political values, beliefs, and principles, are deeply contested.<sup>7</sup>

Not all realists would use this idiom of “contestation,” which predates the recent outpouring of self-consciously “realist” political theory.<sup>8</sup> However, it fits snugly into a realist perspective and many lean on it to criticize traditionalists for allegedly not taking seriously enough the contestatory character of politics. For such critics, a primary ideological illusion of the contemporary epoch, peddled unwittingly by John Rawls, Habermas, and their benighted followers, is the naïve belief that contestatory impulses can be defused and political consensus promoted by deploying rational argument or idealized notions of justice. This approach, the critics maintain, does ideological work in “depoliticizing” assumptions that should remain open to contestation.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the vitality of

<sup>4</sup> Matt Sleat, *Liberal Realism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 57.

<sup>5</sup> Sleat, *Liberal Realism*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Sleat, *Liberal Realism*, 140.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Sleat, “Legitimacy in Realist Thought: Between Moralism and Realpolitik,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 3 (2014): 327.

<sup>8</sup> The real origins of the agonist model lie in Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, to a degree Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. See esp. Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–21. The theme of contestation, and especially that of conceptual contestation, achieved prominence in Anglophone political theory thanks to two works: William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). I note that the latter text was published in an academic series entitled “Contestations.” It is worth pointing out also that Honig has always cited Bernard Williams’s account of “remainders” as a key influence on that book, so there is a continuing affinity between more recent realism and those who independently pioneered agonistic models of pluralism.

<sup>9</sup> I associate this emphasis on “depoliticization” especially with the work of Chantal Mouffe, whose views on this Sleat approvingly cites in *Liberal Realism*. Something is “depoliticized” in the relevant sense when it becomes settled or the object of a consensus, so that it is no longer actively “contested.” Such settlements *must* on the contestatory account be unstable; they are in principle always open to legitimate contestation and hence breakdown. To sum it up in a formula: Depoliticization = decontestation (the latter

emancipatory, democratically empowering politics requires that contestation be embraced, welcomed, and its scope expanded as far as possible, not dismissed as a nuisance to be removed.

I suggest here, however, that this seductive line of thought may itself be a pernicious illusion of the epoch, deeply implicated in the widely acknowledged decadence of late-modern democratic politics.<sup>10</sup> As I will try to show, the sort of ideological illusion involved is closely akin to that which the later Marx associated with “commodity-fetishism.” Accordingly, this essay contends that some contemporary realists—and others sympathetic to an “agonist” vision of politics—may have succumbed to an analogous form of “contest-fetishism.” In what follows, I attempt to draw out this parallel and see how far it can be pressed. The argument is exploratory rather than definitive; the essay will have succeeded if it establishes that the problem of contest-fetishism deserves further investigation.

### Politics as we know it

Put in general terms, my proposal is that in their rush to avoid naïve moral idealism in political reflection, realists risk making an opposite ideological mistake: prematurely accepting historically realized contingencies as immovable facts of life. Here, I take my cue from Marx himself, whose account of ideological illusion realists have, I believe, only half absorbed.

They are certainly right to emphasize Marx’s consistent opposition to what he called “moralizing” criticism. Yet he was equally consistent in rejecting any intellectual approach that unreflectively anoints what is historically established as how things must always be. His early, but never renounced, call for a “ruthless critique of everything existing”<sup>11</sup> was not directed particularly at moralists but rather against the conservative attitude most infamously expressed in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s formula that “what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.”<sup>12</sup> From a Marxian perspective, the problem with those who

---

being a term coined by Freeden). See Michael Freeden, “The Morphological Analysis of Ideology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden, Lyman Sargent, and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 115–37. Obviously, that formula again equates politics with contests.

<sup>10</sup> My point is not to doubt the realist claim that politics should come first. However, if one is putting politics first and also seeking to resist the lure of ideology, one must be sure that one’s background understanding of politics does not import ideologically suspect assumptions about what makes something political. Sleat’s own contribution to this volume questions whether realists must set themselves against all ideological influence in political life; some ideological traditions, including ones with moral content, may, he says, be politically constructive, and he rightly suggests that denying their actual role in politics would be unrealistic. These valuable points, however, stand at an angle to the line taken in this essay. Whether or not one endorses his claim that realists need not cast themselves as comprehensively anti-ideological, this essay contends that emphasizing the contestatory character of politics is likely destructive. It is so, moreover, because it may exemplify a form of ideological illusion that any genuinely realist outlook should abjure.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 12–15.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 10.

indulge that attitude is not that they are moralizers who ignore political reality. Rather, it is that they are too ready to let present historical circumstance dictate to their political imaginations, as if the bare fact that a social practice has successfully realized itself in world history already counts as a strong reason to accept it. To use Max Horkheimer's words, they "lose" themselves in what is "prevalent ... those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members."<sup>13</sup>

Yet it was not only Hegelian idealism that Marx decried for its uncritical deference toward historically entrenched social forms. He thought the same was true of the bourgeois political economists he targeted in his later work. I see no evidence that Marx condemned figures like Adam Smith and David Ricardo (unlike "vulgar" political economists) for "moralizing"; he understood them to be offering a thoroughly "realist" understanding of market society. Yet this did not, for Marx, immunize them against the illusions of capitalist ideology. To the contrary, as we shall see, it led them (in his view) to an intellectual analysis of capitalism unable to discern its irrational, fetishistic character. One aim of this essay is to explain this underappreciated aspect of Marx's later critique of capitalism and its ideological self-legitimation. The form of ideological illusion he picked out in that critique thrives precisely on the aspiration to comprehend society realistically. The hypothesis advanced in this essay is that a similar sort of ideological error crops up when contemporary commentators emphasize the contestatory character of politics in the name of political realism.<sup>14</sup>

For surely it is not as if contestation is an unfamiliar, exotic, or fragile feature of contemporary political experience. To the contrary, hemmed in on all sides by the institutions of competitive party democracy, by the adversarial system of legal adjudication, and by a media parasitic on both, agents already encounter politics overwhelmingly in the form of organized contests and informal contestation. To a large extent, they identify the "political" with struggles to achieve some conventionally recognized, albeit often temporary, victory. So understood, politics offers a kind of order whereby material conflicts and other controversies are converted into procedurally specified and putatively fair contests that can be won or lost (elections, legislative votes, trials, tribunals, and so on).

This model of political interaction has an implication, which again is as much a feature of practice as of theory. The implication is that entitlements to participate in political contests (of one kind or another) should be conferred on protagonists with limited regard to the merits of their respective positions or with a presumption that one's adversaries at least represent a legitimate point of view. For if one's standing to contest were conditioned on independent

<sup>13</sup> Max Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew O'Connell et al. (1939; repr., New York: Continuum, 1982), 253–72.

<sup>14</sup> Enzo Rossi notices the potentially conservative implications of the realist concern for the facts of politics. Enzo Rossi, "Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible," *Constellations* 26, no. 4 (2019): 638–52. However, this does not lead him to question the equation of politics with contestation, which is again uncritically endorsed in that article. See also Lorna Finlayson, "With Radicals Like These, Who Needs Conservatives? Doom, Gloom, and Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, no. 3 (2017): 264–82.

judgments on the merits, the contest would no longer seem fair, but rather skewed toward certain positions and against others. Hence arises the familiar vision of a pluralistic “public sphere” as an open, unprejudiced space within which citizens’ diverse and competing points of view, interests, and ethical commitments struggle to win temporary control over the levers of coercive state power on fair and inclusive terms. Participants in such contests are understood to be entitled to push for their preferred outcomes as hard as they wish as long as they play by the rules of the game and treat those who oppose their preferences as worthy adversaries whose standing to contest commands equivalent respect.

On familiar liberal or “rule of law” versions of this view, legitimate and respectful contests of this sort require some sort of impartial umpire—a neutral state, an independent judiciary, free and fair procedures checked by disinterested observers, and so on—to score the competition and ensure fair play. Realists typically offer a more radical reading. They doubt that any genuinely “neutral,” fair, or impartial standpoint from which to referee political contests is available. To postulate any such standpoint of neutrality, they say, is simply to adopt another contestable position and implicitly to claim, falsely, that in politics, transcending contestation is possible. As William Connolly puts it, the search for a “neutral matrix” is vain; any “attempt to provide a frame both rationally demonstrable and specific enough to guide practical judgment, opens itself to reasonable contestation.”<sup>15</sup> In this radicalized version of the view, agonistic contestation develops at all political levels. This holds right down to the conceptual level; even the most basic categories of politics are themselves “essentially contested concepts.”<sup>16</sup> Contestation here becomes a fractal. Zooming in on even the most rudimentary concepts implicated in political stances reveals neither resolution nor foundational simplicity, but only new occasions for contestation.

Yet even those—realists and otherwise—who on these grounds deny the possibility of any neutral perspective standing above the contestatory fray, retain an expectation of fully inclusive mutual respect (what Connolly calls “agonistic respect”) between political adversaries. Otherwise, politics would disintegrate into open warfare, antagonism rather than agonism, to use Chantal Mouffe’s language. So the demand for a fully inclusive form of mutual respect, in which everyone is to acknowledge the legitimacy of opponents’ claims to contest each other’s political stances, survives the loss of a privileged, synoptic perspective from which political contests are to be impartially adjudicated. Even without moralistic notions of fairness or neutrality, then, the sort of contestation urged by Mouffe, Connolly, Sleat, and many others has a structuring order that makes at least some demands on contestants.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse*, xix.

<sup>16</sup> This notion goes back to a seminal article by W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956): 167–98.

<sup>17</sup> One might ask whether these won’t be moral or ethical demands of some sort, which must threaten the realists’ disavowal of moralism and/or bog realism down in a semantic dispute about what counts as “moral,” but I will not pursue this line of objection here.

As I have suggested, the original archetypes for this contestatory model were the elaborate systems of electoral competition between political parties that have emerged in the West over the past century and by the older schemes of conflict resolution developed and applied by law courts. Yet the model has now expanded into many other arenas. I have already suggested that intellectuals increasingly apply it to the allegedly “contestable” concepts and categories of academic discourse. Partly for that reason, scholarly debate increasingly apes partisan politics, with positions defined by a field of adversarially arrayed “isms”—a strange recursion to medieval scholasticism and its “disputations,” though now with a very unmedieval emphasis on *inclusion*.<sup>18</sup> It has also extended into more informal contexts of open political discourse, which increasingly emulates the contestatory, agonist model. Speakers who enter political discussion are expected first to identify themselves with some conventionally recognized position or movement—with such labels as “liberal,” “conservative,” “gender-critical feminist,” “new atheist,” “climate skeptic,” and so on—and then attempt to score points over interlocutors on opposing teams. In these informal venues, political interventions are made *as if* parties are pleading on behalf of some political identity before some umpire, when in fact no recognized procedure for scoring the contest really exists. Here, there are only iterated engagements in which everyone plays the role of an advocate appealing (increasingly in online echo chambers) to an imagined jury or a projected court of public opinion. Those engaged in such advocacy are willing to disagree stridently about virtually anything except the demand never to disrespectfully exclude any legitimately “contestable” view from the discussion.

So familiar and entrenched has this contestatory, agonist model of engagement become that it is scarcely surprising that highly sophisticated political writers find themselves treating it as nothing more than a commonsensical fact of life, as when Rogers Smith asserts offhand that “politics inevitably involves ... contestation among people with different and evolving senses of their identities, experiences, and foundational commitments.”<sup>19</sup> However, we should remember that, from the beginning, the *point* of ideology critique was precisely to disturb what passes for common sense, and to be most suspicious of what seems most obvious. It seems to me therefore entirely in the spirit of any genuinely realist ideology critique to ask how much truth lies in the assertion that politics inherently “consists” in or is “constituted” by contestation.<sup>20</sup>

Given what I have already said, there is of course a superficial sense in which that assertion is true. For I have conceded that contestation is a ubiquitous, dominant format in which political engagement now occurs. It is politics as we

<sup>18</sup> Geuss recently notes and objects to the “gladiatorial structuration of much philosophical discussion,” and goes on to ask: “Does, however, formalized conflict always help to generate understanding and reveal truth?” His tone implies “no.” This essay agrees. Raymond Geuss, *Not Thinking Like a Liberal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Rogers Smith, “Toward a Progressive Democratic Politics of Race: Reflections on Du Bois’s Legacy,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 8, no. 2 (2011): 389–93.

<sup>20</sup> Enzo Rossi and Matt Sleat, “Realism in Normative Political Theory,” *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 10 (2014): 689–701.



know it, but at this point any Marx-inspired realist should ask: “Is that format a universal feature of human politics under all conditions or rather a contingent circumstance that has achieved salience only in the recent history of Western liberal democracies for quite local reasons?”

Any successful answer to that question would require careful historical research into the evolution of contemporary democratic culture. I cannot detail such an answer here, but I would note strong *prima facie* grounds for doubting that human beings have invariably thought of, still less practiced, politics as “contestation among people with different and evolving senses of their identities, experiences, and foundational commitments.” Commentators have started to use this idiom only very recently (as a Google ngram search reveals), so we should be skeptical that all political history, across epochs and cultures, must be interpreted through that prism. Consider the politics of Confucian filial piety, the Ottoman millet system, medieval monasticism, the repeal of the English Corn Laws, the witch-craze, the defenestration of Prague, or the Dutch *Tulpenmanie*. Were these all plausibly instances of a single, general, human phenomenon of contestation among adversaries over “identity,” “lived experience,” or “foundational” commitments?

Here, a thought experiment might be helpful. Consider some of the historical forces that have most profoundly shaped contemporary politics. Above all, the political scene, represented to us via mass media, has been dominated by competitive party democracy for much of the past century. That scheme has made the professional politician, expected to maintain party discipline and toe the party line, a familiar figure in public life. Likewise for “spin doctors” who have mastered the art of evading journalists’ objections and for whom it is axiomatic that acknowledging error is an admission of weakness to be avoided at all costs. These exemplars of political engagement have unfortunately served as role models guiding online activism, which has accordingly witnessed a kind of “reformation” of propagandism, with each “netizen” now serving as his or her own spin doctor. Their efforts to establish their credentials within their own chosen echo chambers mimic the function of the “talking points” spin doctors issue to keep politicians “on message,” even in the absence of any formal party organization. We have also been socialized to expect that political positions are arrayed along a left-right spectrum comprising various stances that are presumed to be more or less inimical to each other. Our education continues to encourage a broadly positivist contrast between facts and values, objective data and subjective opinion.<sup>21</sup> This encourages agents to presume that “values” are incorrigible, unfalsifiable, existential feelings or identity commitments beyond any rational resolution (and in that sense endlessly contestable).

Imagine any human population that has not been subject to these contingent influences and ask yourself: “Is it plausible that an agonistic, contestatory conception of politics would seem as natural to them as it does to us?” If not, there is every reason to suspect that the current obsession with agonist conflict between self-consciously contestable “identities, experiences, and foundational

<sup>21</sup> Hilary Putnam notes that the fact-value distinction has become an ideological meme so deeply entrenched that it can be expected to survive its repeated refutation. See esp. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).



commitments” is a distinctively late-modern trope, likely unintelligible to agents in earlier eras. These considerations must dent confidence in the breezy equation of politics and contestation commonly affirmed today. Endorsing it without further clarification or argument now looks dogmatic in a way that raises a legitimate suspicion that ideological thinking is involved.

Of course, dogmatism by itself is not enough to establish the presence of ideology in the pejorative Marxian sense; one must also show that the relevant attitudes and beliefs are implicated in protecting a suspect social practice. At least some of those who today equate the “political” with agonistic contestation regard such contestation not as a problem, but rather, as a good integral to the vitality of democracy. Those who take this position might merely shrug at what I have said so far. Why not just grant that the contestatory model of politics is a more historically parochial phenomenon than sweeping ontological statements about the inherent character of “the political” might suggest but nevertheless insist that its recent emergence is to be celebrated rather than regretted?

I will respond more fully to this objection below but note now that excessive polarization is today almost universally recognized as a serious political problem in Western democracies. I find it implausible to think that political polarization and the current intellectual vogue for agonist contestation are unconnected. Blind political intransigence, mindless self-certainty, and the stubborn refusal to acknowledge the slightest possibility that one’s stance might be in error even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary have become serious obstacles to intelligent public action. For reasons explored below, encouraging agents to view politics under a contestatory optic only encourages such politically debilitating hubris.<sup>22</sup>

The hypothesis advanced here, then, is that we should see this as an ideological problem. Ideological error of this sort, if that is indeed what it is, is not the result of the excessive moralism that contemporary realists reject. It is rather a pitfall to which realism itself is prone—or so I want to suggest. If I am right that realism is ideologically vulnerable in this way, why is it? What sort of ideological error is involved? To address these questions, I turn to Marx’s analysis of commodity-fetishism. As we shall see, that analysis was directed against intellectuals—classical political economists—whose realist ambitions Marx thought blinded them to the irrationality of their own society. It may offer valuable lessons for those who today pretend to a similar realism about politics.

### Marx on commodity-fetishism

Marx’s critique of capitalism is of a piece with his larger ambition to expose how, in the course of history, human powers become alienated from their wielders,

<sup>22</sup> At least one prominent advocate of the politics-as-contestation thesis has recently conceded that unless they assume a “tempered” rather than “imperializing” form, agonist models of civic engagement cannot avoid legitimating nefarious political movements. Stephen K. White, “Agonism, Democracy, and the Moral Equality of Voice,” *Political Theory* 50, no. 1 (2022): 59–85. White mentions “insurgent white nationalism” and Trumpian populism; I would add to that list other deeply worrying tendencies such as the bullying censoriousness of “cancel culture” and the development of so-called “scholar-activism.”

inhibiting, rather than enhancing, their rational control over the conditions of life. Marx regards ideological mystification as one important aspect of this irrationality. Contrary to those who suggest that the theme of ideology largely dropped out of his later economic writings, the phenomenon of ideological mystification preoccupies his whole *oeuvre*. I agree, though, with John Mepham that the analysis of ideology offered in his later economic writings differs from and improves on the rather crude account he initially developed in the 1840s.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, Marx's account of commodity-fetishism plays a key role in this more subtle later analysis of ideological complicity in capitalism.

What unites Marx's early and late views is an emphasis on *religious* belief and practice as prototypical of ideological illusion. His use of the idiom of "fetishism" in *Capital* underlines this. The term 'fetishism,' for Marx, carries none of the kinky post-Freudian implications that make us snigger. He uses it in a purely religious sense to refer to the worship of specific objects, idols, or symbols that purport to represent divine forces or entities. Many passages in *Capital* draw attention to the *religiosity* that Marx attributes to capitalist routines, but it is clearest in the section on commodity-fetishism, which mentions magic, necromancy, theology, hidden suprasensible qualities, enigmas, and metaphysical strangeness. Marx here intends a very striking claim. Under the logic of commodity exchange, the objects that are produced and exchanged in market economies effectively become objects of religious devotion in a nonmetaphorical sense, for we are made to serve them and their needs rather than the other way around. This unacknowledged subjection to the rule of things is for Marx a form of idolatry, the irrational worship of false Gods. It is this idolatry that Marx thinks that capitalist ideology masks and that his own analysis aims to expose.

To appreciate the distinctive character of Marx's claims along these lines, it is worth differentiating his argument about commodity-fetishism from the traditional theist polemic against idolators. The latter presumes that there are at least some genuine Gods who should be worshipped and despairs of believers who instead fixate on idols (graven images, holy relics, and so on) rather than the real thing. Marx is not concerned with *misdirected* worship in this sense, because he assumes that the attitude of worship itself, regardless of where it is oriented, is inherently problematic. Following Ludwig Feuerbach, he thinks that religious worship, in theory and practice, always involves human agents mystifying themselves—their own capabilities, circumstances, and actual needs. Capitalism, for Marx, subjects us to the rule of things, but at bottom, the rule of things is nothing but humanity ruling itself in a *verrückt*, self-defeating fashion, just as the supposed authority of Gods in religious practice is another self-limiting, all-too-human contrivance.

Why does Marx emphasize these allegedly religious aspects of capitalist practice? A major reason is that they are sharply incongruent with the outlook he associates with the capitalist bourgeoisie. A famous passage in the *Communist Manifesto* characterizes that outlook:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has ... pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors",

<sup>23</sup> John Mepham, "The Theory of Ideology in Capital," *Radical Philosophy* 2 (1972): 12–19.

and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value ... [and] has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers. ... [It] has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.<sup>24</sup>

This passage polemically outlines the terms on which he thinks the unwitting creators of commercial society affirm their creation. It depicts the exemplary bourgeois as a hard-nosed, unsentimental realist. On Marx’s portrayal, such bourgeois have no patience for metaphysical or religious mystery. They prefer to trust in the technological potential of empirical science as a way to meet needs and master human circumstance. They are partisans of progress who would pitilessly sweep aside any traditional allegiances that obstruct it. Their intellectual outlook is pragmatic and utilitarian, committed to coping with the world as plain observation reveals it. Like Thomas Gradgrind and Ralph Nickleby,<sup>25</sup> they see in human nature nothing more than the clockwork of rational self-interest. They claim to judge the rationality and value of social practices by dispassionately accounting costs and benefits, not by relying on sentiment, intuition, or traditional dogmas.

When we piece together these elements, what emerges from Marx’s discussion is the close affinity he perceives between the characteristic outlook of the bourgeoisie and a familiar kind of Enlightenment rationalism. Marx’s critique of commodity-fetishism is best understood, I submit, as addressed to this bourgeois self-image. Echoing Friedrich Schiller’s notion of “desacralization” (*entgötterung*) and anticipating Max Weber’s better-known concept of “disenchantment” (*entzauberung*), it draws attention to the demystified aspect under which denizens of modern, post-Enlightenment society see themselves and their social relations. Yet Marx’s critical focus is quite different from those of Schiller and Weber.

The latter are concerned with the disorienting psychological and social effects of a thoroughly rationalized daily existence, fearing that it denudes modern life of spiritual meaning. Their fears along these lines, however, presuppose that demystification and rationalization are real and characteristic features of the modern world. Marx’s discussion of commodity-fetishism makes it clear, on the other hand, that he believes that capitalist social routines, contrary to the self-image just described, in fact “abound” in the very forms of mysticism and metaphysical strangeness that bourgeois sensibility and practices pride themselves on having escaped. In other words, for Marx, capitalism attracts criticism

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, in Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 475–76.

<sup>25</sup> Characters, respectively, in Charles Dickens’s novels *Hard Times* (1854) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839).

because it frustrates rather than fulfills its own aspiration to disenchantment. On his view, far from being a system from which all traces of religiosity, mystery, and worship have been expunged, capitalism submits its denizens to irrational market forces that dominate them in the manner of an imperious deity. Without their realizing it, agents locked into capitalist routines act in ways more akin to fetish-worship than they are in a position to acknowledge. Marx regards this as a form of ideological delusion particularly characteristic of the bourgeois era.<sup>26</sup>

Why is it difficult for the bourgeois mind to acknowledge the fetishistic character of commercial capitalism? Marx's answer appeals to two mutually reinforcing factors. First, there is the pervasive, immersive character of "modes of production" in general and (in capitalism) of commodity production in particular. This makes it very difficult for agents to think outside the terms offered by the economic system in which they live. For practical purposes, agents are bound to take many of the basic features of their form of life for granted. Those features comprise a presupposed framework within which day-to-day decisions, plans, and ambitions make sense; under capitalism, this everyday deliberation about what is worthy of rational choice is dominated by judgments about commodity value, opportunities for profit, market forces, interest rates, financial solvency, and so on. Who will hire me, and for how much? How much is my labor worth to others? Is this the right time to sell or retire? Save or invest? Is this career viable for me? As agents make these local decisions, reckoning by the movements of prices and the commodities whose value they represent, questions about the rationality of the wider economic system that forces these considerations on their attention tend to recede from view. Life is short, attention is scarce, and the social structures we inhabit are immensely complex, particularly in modern times; few have the time, resources, or patience to interrogate them or view them synoptically. Marx's own life, pulled back from the brink of penury only by Friedrich Engels's charity, illustrates the personal cost of taking seriously the project of "ruthless criticism."

The resulting tendency to focus on what immediately dominates the foreground of agents' daily experience is exacerbated by a second factor that Marx emphasizes. Marx finds a close affinity between the bourgeois managerial outlook and a flat empiricism that regards inferences from observed data as the gold standard for scientific insight. Marx certainly values empirical analysis and respects the natural sciences. Yet he does not think that properly scientific criticism of society can subsist on empirical observation alone, because that risks taking mere appearances too much at face value. Toward the end of *Capital*, Marx comments that "all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence."<sup>27</sup> Thus he chastises Smith for only "tak[ing] the external phenomena of life, as they seem and appear and merely describ[ing], catalogu[ing], recount[ing], and arrang[ing] them under formal definitions."<sup>28</sup> The problem, to reconstruct Marx's objection in terms he did

<sup>26</sup> Not to say that it is the only one.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 956.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Progress Publishers, 1863), chap. X, sec. 2, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch10.htm#sa2>.

not use, is that studying human society differs from the study of the phenomena addressed in the natural sciences because, in the former case, there is always the possibility that observed patterns might change because human agents engage in rational action to alter those patterns and replace them with new ones. This requires a mode of critical historical analysis that reads into the development of social cooperation a practical aim: the progressive liberation of human powers such that they are deployed intelligently to satisfy legitimate needs and interests.

Exactly how such analysis is supposed to proceed is notoriously unclear in Marx's own work, an issue that cannot be resolved in this essay. The relevant point here is that, on his view, simply observing one's own society will not be enough to distinguish between those features of social life that are genuinely common to all historical formations and those that are in principle alterable and hence open to critical reflection. Without some way of drawing that distinction plausibly, analysts inevitably run the risk of lapsing into what Geuss and the critical theory tradition call "objectification" mistakes. Such mistakes occur when agents indulge "a false belief to the effect that some social phenomenon is a natural phenomenon, or, to put it another way, ... falsely 'objectify' their own activity, ... especially if they take that activity to be a natural process outside their control."<sup>29</sup> "Commodity-fetishism," as Marx understands it, includes such a mistake. The ubiquity and practical immediacy of commodity production and exchange refract to participants a powerful surface appearance. This can easily—and in the case of political economists, according to Marx *did*—mislead observers into presuming that the powers and movements of material goods as they circulate on the market can be understood in the manner of a natural science.

That is why Marx's references to "bourgeois" political economy so frequently challenge its assumption that the dynamics of commodity exchange operate as fixed "regulative law[s] of nature," appearing to control society much as the "law of gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him."<sup>30</sup> It is worth comparing this reference to the law of gravity in *Capital* with an earlier comment in the preface to the *German Ideology*:

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistics brought him new and manifold evidence. This valiant fellow was the type of the new revolutionary philosophers in Germany.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas & the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>30</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 30.

This passage criticizes a strand in German idealism that offers a very different paradigm from the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo later targeted in *Capital*. The problem with the former, for the early Marx, is that it implies that historically dominant forms of consciousness determine the concrete character of social relations at particular times such that agents are free to change their forms of life simply by changing their attitudes and beliefs. This, he thought, indulges the idealist illusion that those material forms themselves impose no independent constraints on human thought and action.

The charge the later Marx lays against bourgeois political economists is quite different. They accept his realist claim that capitalist forms of life are in principle constrained by structural imperatives that cannot be philosophically wished away. Marx thinks, however, that they misclassify these constraints as inevitable facts of nature rather than as the historical contingencies he claims they are. If the “valiant fellow” of the *German Ideology* confuses subjection to the forces of nature with irrational idolatry, the bourgeois political economists targeted in *Capital* make the opposite mistake. They assimilate the dynamics of commodity circulation to immutable natural facts with which we must simply cope. Accordingly, they cannot conceive them as agents of irrational subjection.

Marx’s own position then lies between those of the “valiant fellow” of the *German Ideology* and the bourgeois political economists. Like the former, he aims to unmask a form of irrational idolatry constitutive of the social practices he rejects. Unlike the “valiant fellow,” however, Marx denies that its irrationality can be removed simply by arguing agents out of their superstitions. It can be eliminated only by replacing the capitalist system to which it is integral.

Like the bourgeois economists, on the other hand, Marx aspires to a form of life in which irrational mysticism is entirely banished, so that human agents can at last reckon their real needs and interests on a rational, undistorted basis and cooperate intelligently to meet them. Yet, unlike the political economists, he insists that capitalism thwarts just this aspiration. The bourgeois conceit that they have achieved a genuinely “realist” apprehension of the terms of human reproduction and mutual service, from which all traces of worship have been purged, is contradicted in the very routines of the system they celebrate. Marx holds that the categories of classical political economy inherit that contradiction; a central aim of *Capital* is to lay it bare. Thus when Marx speaks of the “law of capitalist accumulation, mystified by the economists into a supposed law of nature,” he immediately draws the analogy with religion, characterizing capitalism as a “mode of production in which the worker exists to satisfy the need of existing values for valorization, as opposed to the inverse situation, in which objective wealth is there to satisfy the worker’s own need for development. Just as man is governed, in religion, by the products of his own brain, so, in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.”<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 771–72.

## From commodity-fetishism to contest-fetishism

Can we draw a plausible analogy between this Marxian analysis of commodity-fetishism and the sort of contest-fetishism that I am claiming some contemporary realists indulge? If so, in what sense are these fetishisms *ideological* phenomena?

To draw out my proposed analogy, contestation has become for us (in Marx's sense) the "form of appearance" of political association. The currently prevalent tendency to emphasize the "contestatory" character of public engagement involves an "objectification mistake" that parallels the one of which Marx accuses his political economist interlocutors.<sup>33</sup> Just as Marx complains that the sober realism of the political economists masked unreflective credulity about the rationality of capitalism, so I wish to suggest that presuming "contestation" to be the normal state of politics protects from proper critical scrutiny irrationalities woven deeply into contemporary democratic culture and practice. On that suggestion, those who think of themselves as "realists," committed to viewing politics as it is as opposed to through some "ideal-theoretic" lens, run the risk of "objectifying" political contestation and treating it as a fact of life that is beyond question.

Clearly, agents engaged in formal political contests or informal modes of contestation are not exchanging physical goods or services like buyers and sellers are in a free market. So one could not say of them, as Marx does of those subject to commodity-fetishism, that their "own movement within society" acquires "the form of a movement made by things, which far from being under their control, in fact control them." It may also seem eccentric or hyperbolic to describe contestatory politics as problematically religious or idolatrous.

On the other hand, contestation is the result of rational human action, not a natural force. It also has a ritualistic element and the worship of rituals has always attracted charges of idolatry. George Orwell famously notes the religious quality of the sort of speech typical of "pamphlets" and "manifestos." He observes how speakers drawn into political contests risk turning themselves into machines and instruments of political conformity, writing of an imagined politician trotting out the usual agonistic clichés: "[T]he appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters responses in church."<sup>34</sup> Orwell was writing a while ago, but surely the phenomenon he is discussing is instantly recognizable in the contemporary era.

<sup>33</sup> Since I am not concerned here to assess Marx's critique of capitalism, I set aside the possibility that commodity-fetishism and contest-fetishism might be causally related, although the hypothesis might be worth considering. It is natural to think, for example, that contestation is the political analogue of economic competition, as Joseph Schumpeter suggests. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942).

<sup>34</sup> George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *George Orwell: Essays*, ed. John Carey (London: Everyman, 2002), 961–62.



Whether or not one finds specifically religious metaphors apt in this context, however, the thesis that contestatory ritual rules the world in a problematic way strikes me as far *more* plausible than Marx's claim that capitalism submits us to an irrational rule of things. So far, I have reported Marx's objections to market society uncritically, yet surely those claims come under legitimate pressure, especially from a Hayekian direction. Even if they are not consciously guided, markets may match needs and powers better than does any other known alternative, thanks to their ability to reliably communicate otherwise inaccessible information to agents in the best position to use it efficiently. I know of no comparably promising arguments defending agonistic contestation; those who introduce it do so either as a fact that we must simply accept (the objectification mistake I have been trying to expose) or urge that it somehow fuels democratic vitality. The latter claim is vague and anyway vulnerable to objections already mentioned and further elaborated below.<sup>35</sup> More generally, the idea that the contestatory political procedures under which we currently live disseminate reliable information well and foster rational policy outcomes is certainly fanciful, especially given recent experience.<sup>36</sup> Suggesting that it is highly irrational to allow the levers of political power to be subject to the outcomes of those contestatory procedures is not fanciful at all, whatever one makes of Marx's objections to capitalism.<sup>37</sup>

There are good reasons to think, then, that contest-fetishism submits societies to irrational political rule, but in what sense is this an *ideological* phenomenon? The question is an important one because in neither Marx's argument about capitalism nor in the parallel political case explored here, is fetishism a cognitive syndrome, a matter of beliefs, as an argument about ideology would seem to require. That is, both commodity-fetishism and contest-fetishism refer to historically instantiated *practices*, iterated patterns of behavior characterizing economic and political interaction, and so may not seem really to exemplify ideology. Some of the astutest commentators on Marx's account of commodity-fetishism rightly notice this point. Thus, Norman Geras, Michael Heinrich, and Arthur Ripstein<sup>38</sup> stress that commodity-fetishism is not a straightforward form

<sup>35</sup> Anyway, on strong versions of the contestability thesis, any such argument would have limited force, because the criteria it would use to judge the effectiveness of contestatory procedures would themselves be contestable.

<sup>36</sup> While I do not endorse Jason Brennan's rejection of democracy *tout court*, nor his "epistocratic" alternative, his *Against Democracy* gives ample valid evidence of the irrationalities in contemporary democratic states. His notion of "hoolligan" activism and its tendency to dominate actual public debate (such as it is) chimes closely with the diagnosis of contestatory pathologies offered here. Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), chap. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Weinstock suggests that ruthless adversarialism may have epistemic advantages in political discussion analogous to those associated with self-interested competition on the market or the obligation of zealous advocacy imposed on lawyers representing their clients. Daniel M. Weinstock, "Corruption in Adversarial Systems: The Case of Democracy," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 35, no. 2 (2018): 237. I am skeptical that the analogy holds, for reasons explored in Colin Bird, "Representing and Contesting" (unpublished manuscript), [https://www.academia.edu/40205165/Representing\\_and\\_Contesting](https://www.academia.edu/40205165/Representing_and_Contesting).

<sup>38</sup> Norman Geras, "Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism in Marx's *Capital*," *New Left Review* no. 65 (1971); Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (London: Monthly Review Press, 2004); Arthur Ripstein, "Commodity Fetishism," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (1987): 733–48.

of “false consciousness,” whereby agents acquire an inaccurate picture of the workings of capitalism. For, in a developed market society, commodities—the liabilities they impose, the economic opportunities they afford, the prices they bear, and the needs they satisfy upon consumption—*really do* behave like natural objects and forces in relation to individuals’ practical decisions. When agents notice how commodity markets frame and constrain their everyday choices, they are not living in an ideological fantasy world. They see commercial society pretty much as it is. When social analysts generalize from these data, they may legitimately notice how these constraints display iterating patterns that resemble the law-like regularities uncovered in the sciences. So far, no clear mistake has been made.

Ideological illusion enters Marx’s story, however, at the next step, when analysts, having assumed that the study of society can be a matter of external observation in exactly the way that the study of volcanoes and atomic particles can be, prematurely conclude that the regularities they have discovered are ahistorical, nonrational constraints like fixed laws of nature. According to Marx, this objectification mistake prevented political economists from grasping the irrational and fetishistic quality of market society. His accusation against them may or may not have been fair, but surely he was right to think that in principle such objectification mistakes can be encouraged by the ambition to view social formations “as they really are.” It is because it shares this ambition, I have argued, that contemporary realism—and its interest in isolating the nature of the “political” as an autonomous realm with its own distinctive character—is vulnerable to ideological recruitment. Insofar as it commits the sort of “objectification mistake” I have been discussing, the belief that politics is always and everywhere agonistic and contestatory would qualify as ideological in the sense outlined at the start of this essay, *even though it does not involve any moralistic claim*. That belief can still perform the reconciliatory function characteristic of ideological thinking. It protects a suspect social practice—in this case, currently dominant forms of contestatory, agonist, political engagement—from critical scrutiny. It does so by fixing them in place as immovable aspects of politics that we must accept and work around.

### Putting contestation in its place

One might object that I am making too much of the words “contest” and “contestation.” When realists like Sleat use this idiom, the objection would run, it is merely a *façon de parler*, shorthand for something completely uncontroversial, namely, the elementary point that we cannot imagine political relations without conflicts and disagreement. That is all realists mean to say, so I am making mountains out of molehills.

In response, I agree that no interesting commentator or thinker denies that politics inevitably involves conflict and dissent. If, when they identify politics and contestation, realists mean only this, then what they are saying is unobjectionable—but also completely uninformative. On pain of caricaturing the opposition, realists cannot depict those they deride as “moralists” as denying that claim. Surely, Rawls, Habermas, and so on are perfectly familiar with the endemic

conflicts attending political life. Given this, all of the interesting work is to be done in differentiating types of discord. These come in many shapes and sizes; they may also acquire political relevance in contrasting ways under distinctive historical circumstances. For example, there are wars, diplomatic spats, riots, dynastic quarrels, falling-outs, competitions over scarce resources, zero-sum positional struggles, positive-sum competitions, conflicts of interest, altercations, struggles for honor, grudges, rivalries, goadings, disputes, “agreeing to disagree,” principled dissents, misunderstandings, mistrust, conscientious refusals, resentments, vendettas, betrayals, talking-past-each-other, tensions, accusations, and so on. No useful purpose is served by trying to pretend that these are all the same or should be thought about or dealt with similarly.

With regard to the theme of this essay, then, a key question is: “What *sort* of discord is being picked out when we describe agents as engaged in ‘contestation?’” In general, political philosophers have not thought hard enough about this. Here, I can only offer some preliminary thoughts, based on ordinary language, about the specific ways in which talk of contestation contrasts with other descriptions of political division. The following discussion raises more questions than it answers, but it does establish that the idiom of “contestation” is not simply an innocent synonym for disagreement, conflict, or pluralism, but rather, surreptitiously smuggles into the political contexts in which it is applied a definite, tendentious set of assumptions.

As I mentioned above, “contestation” has become a widely used term only recently, but it is obviously derived from the word “contest,” which is of much longer standing. We can get some sense of the connotations of “contestation,” of the baggage it brings with it, by looking closely at how the concept of contesting is used to capture certain forms of conflict. Here are some relevant observations:

- “Contesting” X is *stronger* than merely “questioning” or “doubting” X. The latter two imply mere curiosity and openness to a satisfactory answer. To be sure, such inquiry can be aggressive and highly motivated when provoked by a suspicion of impropriety: “I’m curious why you upheld her grievance and not mine?” But I do not contest anything simply by asking that question, even aggressively. Contest begins when one is not satisfied by the answer offered and adopts an adversarial attitude toward those who give it (such as complaining to the ombudsman, initiating legal action, mounting a political campaign).
- “Contesting” X is *weaker* than “dismissing X out of hand,” which implies that we can reject X effortlessly or that X is so obviously problematic as to be unworthy of one’s time. Dismissal is appropriate precisely when there is “no contest.”
- “Contesting” is also not merely an epistemic or purely cognitive disposition; it has a performative element, implying a willingness to take some sort of stand against an opponent. That is why “contest” and “dispute” are subtly distinct, although often carelessly conflated; the latter emphasizes the substantive content of a disagreement between one or more parties, whereas the former requires also that parties commit to some procedure by

which their disagreements are put to trial and then won, lost, or drawn and relative to which they take a stand. Thus, one can “dispute” the *result* of an election (disagreement in beliefs with no particular expectation that it can be “won” or “lost”), but one “contests” rather than “disputes” a *seat* in an election (one or more parties participate in an organized competition). Employers and employees are engaged in an “industrial dispute” when, say, their beliefs about appropriate levels of pay differ in a way that leads to protest or a strike; in such cases, we do not speak of an “industrial contest.” Similarly, scientists disagreeing over the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics are engaged in a dispute, not a contest. Two laboratories competing with each other to be the first to clone a sheep or to produce a vaccine are, however, engaged in a contest, not a dispute. There is a finishing line all can see.

- If one cannot lose, one is not engaged in a contest. Disputes and disagreements do not have to be won or lost.<sup>39</sup> To the extent that some conflict never achieves any result (settlement, resolution, win, loss) despite the continued allegiance of the parties, it is a rivalry. When they meet in the final, Manchester City and Manchester United can be said to be “contesting” the Football Association Challenge Cup, but loyal fans who support Manchester City and Manchester United over the years are engaged neither in a contest nor a dispute. Rather, they participate in a long-standing rivalry.

These brief remarks about ordinary language could be developed further, but they already carry several immediate lessons. First, if the core concept is that of a contest—some tournament-like procedure that produces winners, losers, or draws—with a broader category of contestation falling within its gravitational pull, then we can assume that agents engaged in contestation share a particular motivational disposition. If possible, they want to win, but at all costs, want not to lose. To the extent that this disposition becomes overriding, winning and losing will tend to become more important than the substance of the underlying conflict. As noted above, contestation can and perhaps usually does refer to informal conflicts in which there is no formal referee or scorer. These sorts of cases must lie in some fairly distant orbit from the central instances of actual contests. Yet they presumably fall within their gravitational field at all as “contestations” because contestants are moved by a desire to win and not lose. In the absence of any established mechanism for scoring their contestation, they will have to serve, in a sense, as scorers for each other. But to do this, they will want to avoid doing or saying anything that could be seen to be a losing gambit, something *any* observer would see as evidence of weakness. The fear and anxiety inspired by being seen to lose seems integral to the very idea of contestation and chimes with the actual dispositions of political actors. Think, for example, of

<sup>39</sup> Ed Hall reminds me that we do sometimes think of arguments and disputes as being won or lost. But we do not *have* to. Some disputes or arguments are merely resolved, die down, simmer indefinitely, are not discussed again, and so on, with no implication of victory or loss. That implication is, however, integral to the concept of a contest.

professional politicians who hire media consultants to preempt “car-crash” interviews with hostile journalists.

A second lesson is that it “takes two to tango.” That is, contestation is an inherently *joint* activity. One cannot engage in it alone, but only in relation to others identified as adversaries. Whatever sort of game contestation resembles, it cannot be Solitaire. Facing up to this obvious feature of contests and contestation reveals one of several ways in which contestation has a self-fulfilling quality. In *Just and Unjust Wars*, Michael Walzer notes that aggression has a morally coercive character; the aggressor effectively *dares* her victim to respond, knowing that simply rolling over will be perceived as cowardice.<sup>40</sup> In this way, victims of aggression are compelled to defend themselves not only because they want to reappropriate any material loss (resources, territory, and so on), but also because they must defend their impugned honor. In a similar way, contestation sets in motion a hardening of division between us and them, making contestants of others whether or not they wish to be (for example, think of the tactic referred to as “triggering the liberals”).

Third, the performative element in contestation illustrates another way in which it has a self-fulfilling quality.<sup>41</sup> We have seen that contesting something implies not only a belief that it is wrong or open to doubt, but also a disposition to take a stand on the issue and to invest resources in fighting it out. If so, then describing X as contestable carries quite strong implications, for it tacitly commits the speaker to the claim that X can be legitimately resisted, that those who in fact contest X must have some sort of point. These implications are strengthened further by recalling the expectation, accepted even by radical agonists like Mouffe, that one respect one’s political opponents as worthy adversaries and cultivate a regime of unbiased inclusion in relation to those wishing to enter political contests. As noted above, that expectation cannot depend on a judgment about the substantive merits of the stances concerned, because then it would appear that the field of contest is biased in favor of some range of independently acceptable or more plausible views. However, if one cannot judge “worthiness to contest” on the merits, what is left to decide when something is legitimately contestable?

The expectation of unbiased, respectful inclusion tends to imply that whoever *in fact* contests X should be presumed to be a legitimate adversary. But then, by stubbornly sticking to one’s guns and refusing to concede the claims of an opposing party, one *makes it the case* that an issue continues to be contested. The question of whether a point of view is “contestable” then appears to be settled by an appeal to the facts. *That* rational agents disagree implacably about some issue and are willing to take a stand on it, is taken to be evidence that their respective positions *are* “contestable,” and therefore worthy of all the protections that come with “respect for legitimate adversaries.” This not only “objectifies” contestation in the way I have outlined in this essay, misclassifying

<sup>40</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 53.

<sup>41</sup> I am not the first to have noticed the self-fulfilling character of contestatory disagreement. See Ian Shapiro, “Gross Concepts in Political Argument,” *Political Theory* 17, no. 1 (1989): 68.

it as an unquestionable feature of politics *as such*, but also has other unfortunate consequences.

Allowing the bare fact that some individual or group chooses to contest some stance to establish that that stance is indeed “contestable,” with the same right to be respected as a worthy adversary as any other contested position, offers a route whereby the mere fact of dissent can magically acquire an unearned title to be taken seriously in political discussion. For it creates the impression that, for political purposes, contested issues are “equipollent” in the sense intended by the ancient skeptics: equally good arguments can always be given for or against them. Spin doctors and propagandists have long exploited this alchemy to defend the indefensible. It was bad enough when practiced only by professionals, but as I hinted above, it has now filtered down into online echo chambers and epistemic bubbles that increasingly toxify political discussion today. Against this, one can only insist on what should be obvious but that the contestatory ethos obscures, namely, that the bare act of contesting a position cannot make one’s own claims any more or less plausible than they really are. When agents disagree about what to do, it is very unlikely that all parties to the disagreement adopt equally plausible positions.<sup>42</sup> Urging otherwise is wishful and often ideologically manipulative, affirmative action for bad arguments. Such illusions are convenient for those entering political discussion with only lousy arguments for implausible or nefarious positions.

This irrationality is, I believe, compounded by the way in which contest-fetishism encourages the sort of self-righteous intransigence that John Stuart Mill has in mind when he inveighs against the “presumption of infallibility.”<sup>43</sup> At first glance, those who celebrate a politics of endless contestation seem to take an anti-dogmatic position very similar to Mill’s. Connolly, for example, seems to express the same misgivings about infallibility and dogmatism when he claims that his hypothesis of “essential contestability” encourages “opposing parties to discern a possible element of rationality in the reading they contest” and helps keep “dissident perspectives alive.”<sup>44</sup> Mouffe similarly advertises her view as requiring a form of toleration. At first, hearing the acknowledgment that one’s political stance is contestable sounds humble and conciliatory. Yet this, too, is an illusion; Mill’s view differs sharply from that implicit in contest-fetishism.

Mill was entirely traditional in presuming that I ought to be willing to revise my beliefs whenever I am presented with a reasoned view that contradicts them. In contrast, the essential contestability thesis entails no such obligation to reconsider. When concepts are essentially contested, none need feel that their own interpretation of that concept is challenged by others’ reasoned dissent. Indeed, the reverse is true; the contestability thesis assures everyone that each is perfectly entitled to construe it as they do, whatever an opposing party says.

<sup>42</sup> See on this Ugur Aytac, “On the Limits of the Political: The Problem of Overly Permissive Pluralism in Mouffe’s Agonism,” *Constellations* 28, no. 3 (2021): 417–31.

<sup>43</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), chap. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse*, 227.

What matters in Mill's account is not whether I can coherently forge ahead with my political agenda in the face of objections, but whether those objections give me good reason to reconsider and even abandon my agenda.<sup>45</sup> Where Mill emphasizes our proper vulnerability to others' arguments, the logic of "essential contestability" affirms our right to be impervious to them. Once all parties have discharged their duty of "agonistic respect" (or its equivalent) by conceding the "contestability" of their respective positions, they can shrug off any objections they face on that basis. Everyone is then freed to fight their corners as ruthlessly as they wish and with as much self-certainty as they can muster. After all, what is the point of entering a contest if one isn't prepared to give it one's all? At the same time, the overwhelming likelihood that most of our political attitudes are ill thought out, less defensible than we flatter ourselves they are, or completely confused, is glossed over. Far from pointing toward a more accommodating, tolerant, conciliatory, and *realistic* form of political cooperation, then, contest-fetishism promotes ever greater irrational hubris and mutual imperviousness. Few would deny that this has been an important aspect of our recent political discontents.

To clarify, the point here is *not* that realists are responsible for all this.<sup>46</sup> As I have stressed throughout this essay, contest-fetishism is not a doctrine or belief. It is, rather, a deeply questionable aspect of current political practice and it has developed for complex historical reasons, none of which has much to do with realism. However, realism promises to be better than its moralist opponents at resisting ideological illusion. I have tried to suggest that, at least with regard to contest-fetishism, this has been an empty boast. A realism worth wanting should see through contest-fetishism and help liberate us from its worst excesses. However, the realist injunction to work within politics *as it is* can promote an uncritical equation of politics and contestation. If this essay is on target, this surrender to contest-fetishism is ideological, in Marx's pejorative sense.

**Acknowledgments.** I wish to thank the other contributors to this volume, to the editors for inviting me to contribute, and to an anonymous referee. Their comments were all rich, perceptive, and unfortunately too copious to address comprehensively in this essay. Special thanks are due to Matt Sleat for graciously accepting the role of a foil, Brian Leiter and Ritwik Agrawal for helpful clarifications about Karl Marx, Adrian Blau for suggesting a better title, and Dave Schmidtz for his characteristically careful editorial scrutiny.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

---

<sup>45</sup> His view chimes closely with the view defended in Molly McGrath's essay in this volume, which I enthusiastically endorse, that a responsible attitude to reflection on one's beliefs should be one of real humility, ready to be challenged, rather than to dig in. As I argue, however, contest-fetishism promotes precisely the sort of ideological *hexis* (state or condition) that she criticizes, for reasons that overlap with the misgivings cited here.

<sup>46</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for making me realize the importance of this clarification.